# Fowl Feathered Review

No. 197

## ISSUE 197: WHERE THE ABSINTHE DRIPS, AN ONTOLOGY DISSOLVES

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition–an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart–it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

*"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."*
*--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue*

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations,
please return it to us in its original condition
for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

# Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded)
To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

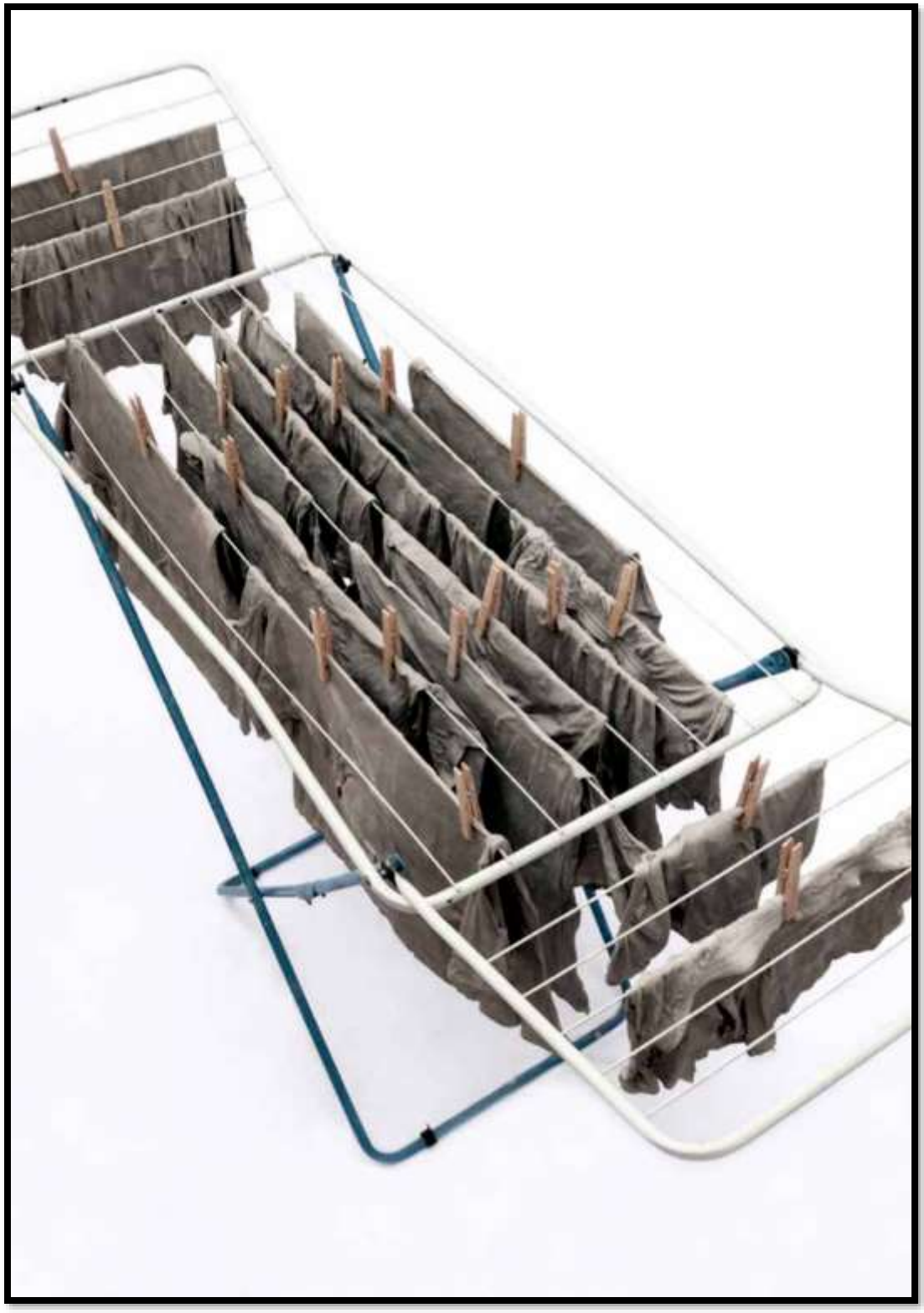
1. Craft (or Culinary Construct): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.
2. The Gatekeeper: Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, “China Wok Habitue,” suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it’s more likely a testament to the local takeout joint’s generous portions. (Please note: Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)
3. Format: Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (Pro-tip: The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)
4. The Cycle Continues: We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.
5. The Sandwiches: Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.
6. Leap Year Follies: Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid



# My name is Mario Loprete. I'm an italian artist.

*I wish to show you my artistic project.*

Painting for me is my first love. An important, pure love. Creating a painting, starting from the spasmodic research of a concept with which I want to send a message it's the base of my painting. The sculpture is my lover, my artistic betrayal to the painting. That voluptuous and sensual lover that gives me different emotions, that touches prohibited cords...

My artistic project was immediately very well received. I am very satisfied with my work and happy that for over twenty years my artistic reading of Hip Hop has been exhibited in various public and institutional spaces in Holland, Germany, the U.K. and in the U.S.A., attracting the attention of public and private collectors. In 2020 SNOOP DOGG published his portrait painted by me on his Instagram profile with over 50 million followers and

since then many Italian and international rappers have wanted a portrait of themselves, which made me very proud and made me known to the general public. For over 2 decades, I have been painting on the theme of hip hop and its role in our daily lives, regardless of latitude. However, I sensed that something was missing in my work, a spark that would detonate the conceptual bomb I carried inside. That special something was absent.

Like a lightning bolt, the idea struck me: the only common element in every part of my artistic project was the substance that held everything together: concrete.

So, I replaced the canvases with reinforced concrete supports to highlight even more realistically the connection with the urban style. The television footage of the survivors emerging from the Twin Towers, covered with a layer of concrete,

together with the reappearance of my memory from a visit to the excavations of Pompeii, strongly pushed my transition to sculpture.

For my Concrete Sculptures I use my personal clothing. Throughout some artistical process, in which I use plaster, resin and cement, I transforms them into art. My memory, my DNA, my memories remain concrete inside, transforming the person that looks at the artworks a type

of post-modern archeologist that studies my work as they were urban artefacts.

I like to think that those who look at my sculptures created in 2020 -2022 will be able to perceive the anguish, the vulnerability, the fear that each of us has felt in front of a planetary problem that was Covid 19. Under a layer of cement there are my clothes with which I lived this nefarious period. Clothes that

survived Covid 19, very similar to what survived after the 2,000-year-old catastrophic eruption of Pompeii, capable of recounting man's inability to face the tragedy of broken lives and destroyed economies.

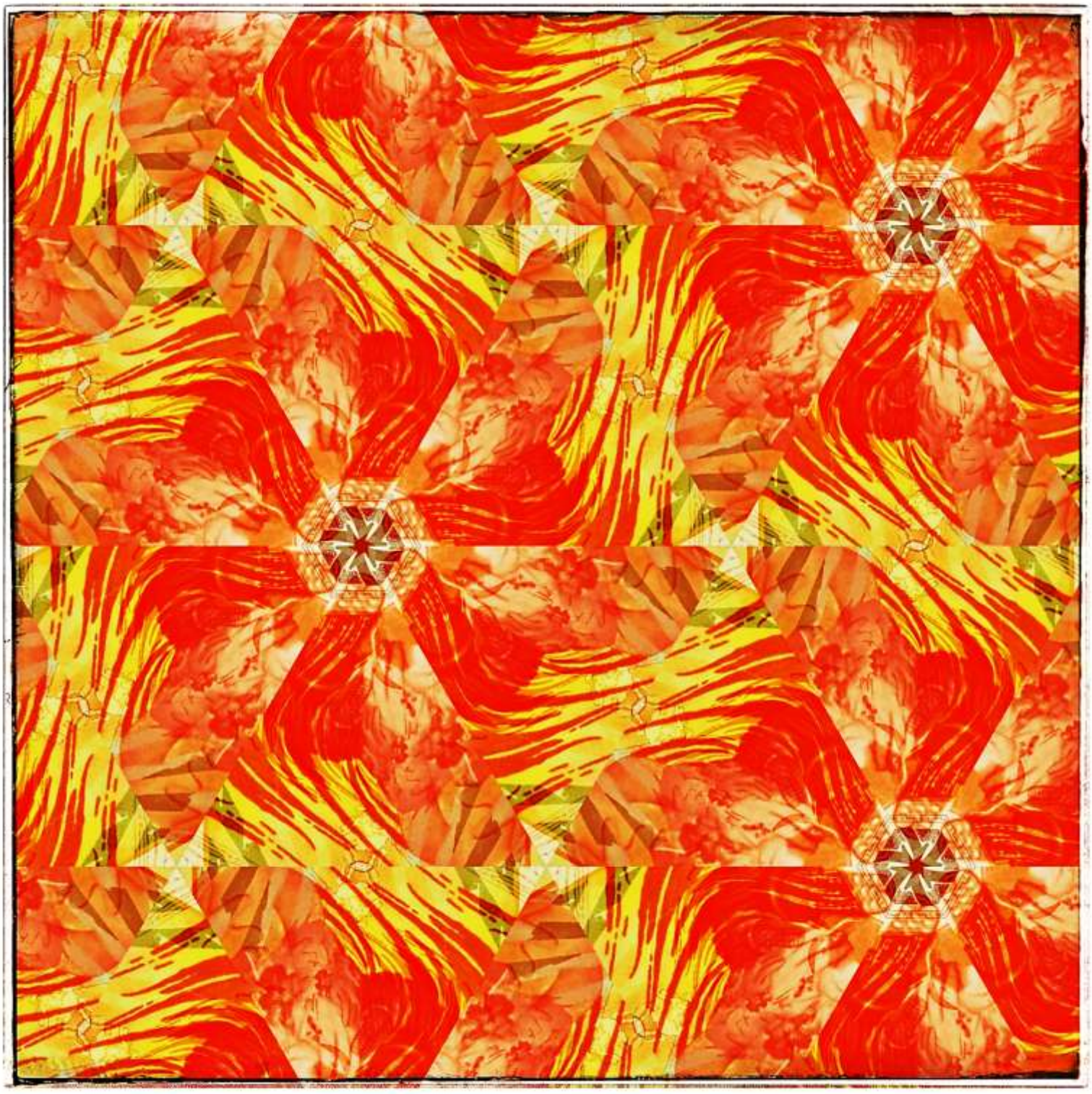
Please visit my Instagram profile for more information at

www.instagram.com/mariolopreteo

I will wait patiently and hopeful your considerations

Best regards

Mario Coprete



# Old Man Humanity and the Crickets in Amber: Or, A Peculiar Discourse on Haberdashery, Humbugs, and the Hum of the Ineluctable Static.

## BY ELROY J. LEROY

Old Man Humanity, a collection of angles and anxieties draped in what might once have been a suit, shuffled forward. His shoes made a sound like pebbles in a tin can. He wore a 1930s Borsalino Fedora, dark charcoal grey wool felt, grosgrain ribbon band, size 7 1/8, showing significant moth damage to the crown and a slightly crushed brim, the original silk lining faded and brittle. He held aloft a confection. A cricket, entombed in sugar. “But the legs, Tsunami. The tiny, articulated legs. Are they not a testament to effort? A miniature engineering marvel, preserved in amber-colored sweetness?” He paused, then added, “My aunt Mildred collected thimbles. She believed they contained the souls of lost seamstresses.”

The Tsunami shuddered. A ripple that threatened to dissolve the very notion of perspective. “Thimbles. A containment strategy. A futile attempt to impose order on the chaos of thread. The thread itself is a lie. A manufactured connection. Like the idea of a ‘family’. A construct designed to alleviate the unbearable weight of solitude.” A prolonged silence, broken only by the hum and the distant, rhythmic dripping of something unseen.

The “family” assembled. Not a gathering, but a dispersal. A collection of mannequins constructed from discarded furniture and half-remembered dreams. The Suicide Club, represented by a rocking chair missing one leg, emitted a series of mournful creaks. Its pronouncements, delivered through a rusty gramophone, consisted entirely of excerpts from instruction manuals for obsolete appliances. “Step 3: Ensure proper grounding. Step 7: Do not immerse in water.” The figure presiding over the rocking chair wore a

1960s Mod Porkpie Hat, black velvet, with a narrow brim and a high, cylindrical crown, size 7 3/4, manufactured by Christy's of London, exhibiting minor staining from what appears to be spilled coffee and a slightly misshapen form due to improper storage.

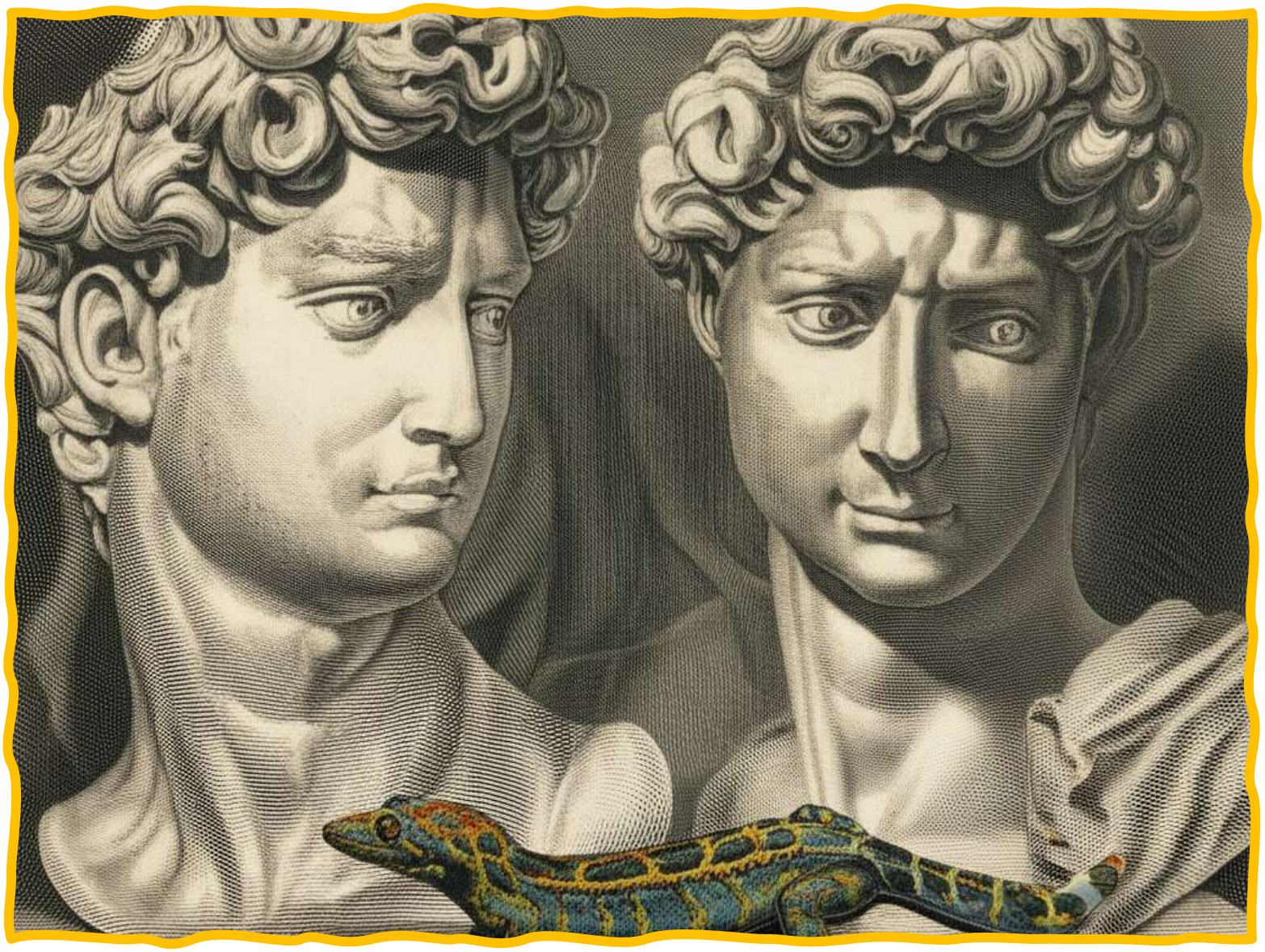
A figure resembling a librarian, but with an oversized head and a disconcerting lack of eyes, began to recite a list of discontinued breakfast cereals. "Sugar Smacks. Alpha-Bits. Cap'n Crunch's Peanut Butter Crunch. Each one a failed attempt to capture the fleeting essence of childhood. Each one a monument to the inevitability of disappointment." She sported a 1980s Straw Boater, made of tightly woven straw, adorned with a navy-blue grosgrain ribbon and artificial flowers, size 7 1/4, likely a souvenir from a seaside resort, showing signs of sun damage and a slightly unraveling ribbon. The air grew thick with the scent of stale cardboard and unfulfilled potential.

Mermaid Elle, inexplicably present, performed a series of slow, deliberate movements, her scales catching the dim light. She spoke of the therapeutic benefits of synchronized swimming, but her words were drowned out by the increasingly insistent hum. She wore a 2010s Millinery Fascinator, constructed from iridescent peacock feathers and a sinamay base, secured with a comb, size one-size-fits-most, purchased from a boutique in Brighton, exhibiting a slight bend in the feathers and a faint scent of hairspray. "The water... it remembers. It remembers everything. The lost cities. The forgotten languages. The precise location of all the missing socks." She paused, then added, "My grandmother believed that fish were the reincarnated souls of tax collectors."

Kirby Congdon, a gaunt figure clutching a handful of mimeographed poems, stepped forward. "The problem is not the lack of audience. The problem is the audience itself. They are distracted. By the blenders. By the thimbles. By the relentless pursuit of smooth transitions." He wore a 1940s US Army Garrison Cap, olive drab wool, with a stiff peak and a small brass insignia, size 7, bearing the faint imprint of a sweatband and a lingering odor of mothballs, likely a surplus item acquired from a flea market. He began to recite a poem about a broken toaster, his voice a raspy whisper. "The coils glowed red. A promise of warmth. But the bread remained cold. A metaphor for the human condition, perhaps. Or perhaps just a faulty heating element." He trailed off, then began to snore softly.

The Tsunami pulsed. A slow, deliberate rhythm. The hum intensified. The static returned, crackling in the air like a dying fire. Old Man Humanity offered the cricket sucker again. “A peace offering, Tsunami. A small gesture of understanding.”

The Tsunami did not respond. It simply was. A vast, aqueous complaint, suspended in a theater of dust and regret. The outcome remained uncertain. Or perhaps, the outcome was irrelevant. Perhaps the only truth was the constant, low frequency hum, the static in the veins, the inescapable accumulation of dust. And the faint, lingering scent of boiled cabbage. The sentence remained unfinished, perpetually looping back on itself, a testament to the futility of articulation.



# The Siren's Wail and the Gecko's Revenge

## By Churro Bisque

In the apartment adjacent to the fire department—where sirens scream like dying actors and wheels grind against pavement with the sound of teeth being pulled from ancient skulls—lives Gex, a tokay gecko of failed thespian ambitions and hypochondriacal tendencies. His skin, mottled blue-gray with orange spots, resembles the ceiling of an abandoned theater where his father once performed Hamlet before collapsing mid-soliloquy, his final breath escaping in a wheeze that sounded suspiciously like applause.

The sirens. Always the sirens. They pierce Gex's translucent eardrum membranes like needles dipped in memory. Each wail transports him back to that night—his father's body carried offstage while hotel employees phoned for emergency assistance, the audience of four hundred frozen in pained silence as the stroke paralyzed his right side. By the time the city fire-and-rescue squad arrived, Father was unable to talk, unable to hear, unable to see.

"Will you bear with me a minute?" his father had asked the audience. "I can't seem to get the words out."

Gex paces across his terrarium, glass walls smudged with the oils of his constant movement. His collection of medical journals towers beside his bed—a miniature mattress salvaged from a child's dollhouse, now encrusted with molted skin cells and the residue of nocturnal panic attacks.

"The symptoms suggest cardiac arrhythmia," he whispers to Multiple Dave, the quadruple bust arrangement modeled after Michelangelo's masterpiece that occupies the western corner of his habitat. "Or perhaps early-onset gekkoparesis."

Multiple Dave says nothing. His four identical marble faces stare outward in cardinal directions, each bearing the same placid expression of Renaissance serenity, each lacking the infamous tiny member of the original.

"You're better without it," Gex assures the sculpture. "A phallus is merely another appendage to monitor for discoloration and unusual discharge."

The silence between them stretches like elastic fabric made of neoprene, synthetic rubber, until Gex's attention snaps back to the window, where beyond the glass the fire truck sits in cruel anticipation of its next deafening departure.

Six thousand pairs of socks—delivered yesterday in boxes that transformed his apartment into a labyrinth of licensed merchandise—wait balled and ready. Lego patterns. Brian Wilson's bearded face multiplied across ankle-high cotton. Cartoon characters whose smiles stretch with obscene cheer. Gex has spent seventeen hours rolling each pair into compact projectiles, his scaled fingers working methodically while his mind calculated trajectories, the precise arc needed to bombard the fire truck below.

"Maybe I'll get the words back," he says, echoing his father's final coherent sentence.

Multiple Dave's silence feels suddenly judgmental.

"Don't look at me like that," Gex hisses. "You with your four perfect heads and no appendages to worry about. What do you know of suffering? What do you know of sirens that slice through memory and deposit you back into that Miami Beach hotel where your father died while you watched from a potted palm, too small, too green, too gecko to help?"

The catapult—constructed from popsicle sticks and rubber bands ordered from a children's science catalog for only 7¢ a day—waits by the window. Gex has positioned it precisely, calibrated for maximum impact. When the firemen rush to their next emergency, they will be met with a barrage of balled socks, a textile rain of vengeance.

"It's not about revenge," he explains to Multiple Dave, whose marble eyes reflect nothing. "It's about the integrity of memory. It's about the non-objective imagery of grief."

Outside, a siren begins to wail.

Gex freezes, his translucent eyelids closing sideways across bulging eyes. The sound enters him not through ears but through skin, through bone, through the collective memory of every cell in his small reptilian body. He sees his father again, turning to the accompanist: "Would you play 'Dardanelle'?"

With movements that seem both frantic and precisely choreographed, Gex loads the first sock-ball into the catapult's cradle. It bears the image of a smiling cartoon brick, its red fabric already faded from too much handling. The siren builds, a crescendo of emergency that makes the glass walls of the terrarium vibrate at a frequency just below shattering.

"Now," Gex whispers, and releases the trigger.

The sock arcs through the open window, a perfect parabola of textile revenge, followed by another, then another—a bombardment of soft missiles raining down upon the departing fire truck. Some land with satisfying thuds against metal. Others miss entirely, decorating the street below with scattered socks that pedestrians will later collect with puzzled expressions.

The truck disappears around the corner, its siren dopplering into distance, but Gex continues firing until his ammunition is depleted and his scaled fingers ache with the repetitive motion of loading and releasing.

In the sudden silence, he turns to Multiple Dave.

"Did you see?" he asks, breathless with exertion and emotion. "Did you see how they slowed for just a moment? How the driver looked up in confusion? That's what my father needed—just a moment's pause, a single interruption in the relentless forward motion of time."

Multiple Dave says nothing, but in the late afternoon light, his marble faces seem almost to smile.

Gex collapses beside the empty catapult, his small body heaving with exertion or perhaps with sobs. "I can't see," he whispers. "I can't hear."

But he does not collapse. He does not die. Instead, he begins to plan tomorrow's bombardment, calculating how many socks he can retrieve from the street below before the fire truck returns, how many more orders he must place with Socks4U to maintain his arsenal.

The hypochondriac failed actor tokay gecko lives on, honoring the memory of his dead father in the only way he knows how—with absurdity, with persistence, with six thousand pairs of licensed merchandise socks and the absolute certainty that someday, somehow, he will get the words back.

# JOE TELLS YOU A STORY (AND IT HAS ITS MOMENTS)

*By Joe "Joe" Joe. Not "Triple Threat Joe". No, not "Joe Joe". Just "Joe." Simple. Less is more. No shame in one name.*

It's good to be here. Unless I owe you money. Then it's bad. Allow me to introduce myself. Joe, this is Alex, Jordan, Taylor, Jamie (gotta be careful—light fingers, especially around unattended wallets), Pat, Chris, Morgan (she's still convinced the moon landing was filmed in a potato field in Aroostook County), Casey, Drew, Jesse (the guy who tried to pay for a pizza with Monopoly money last week), Dakota, Lynn, Blair, Quinn (you met her at the family reunion in Hoboken last summer—she was the one with a pet ferret), Reese, Rowan, Sawyer, Spencer (once tried teaching a pigeon to fetch—yes, really), Bailey, Devon, Emerson (still searching for that sock lost in 2007), Finley, Hayden, Indigo, Jules (specializes in rehoming garden gnomes), Kai, Lane (believes all cats secretly run a global surveillance network), Micah, Noel, Peyton (once entered a dog show with a convincing hand puppet), River, Rory, Sage, Sidney (has a personal vendetta against single-use plastics), Toby, Winter, Xavier (crowdfunding for a trip to find Bigfoot's cousin in the North Woods), Yara, Zane, Erin (trying to knit a whale cozy for three years), Frankie (claims he can communicate with squirrels via interpretive dance), Avery, Kendall (just got out of jail—don't ask), Harper, Riley, and Charlie. They're all in the same band—forget the name, it's polka fusion. Oh, The Lederhosen Liberation Front? Yeah, that sounds right. Some poor schmuck will have to put THAT on the sign outside

the Super 8. “I’m missing an ‘N’. I’ll just change ‘Front’ to ‘Frump’.” VERY Burning Man. Let’s go with that. You’ve been pretty chill so far—I like that.

Now, I want to share something about myself—few people know… What was that? I have no life? Man, that was quick. Little too on the nose. You want to switch, and I’ll sit with your mom—wait, that’s not your mom? I just assumed. She IS the responsible one in the relationship, though, am I right? Yeah. It’s kinda obvious.

I’m back. Like Superman in high-tops. Try not to think about the Man of Steel in Converse sneakers. Doesn’t exactly go with his Spanx and briefs. Remember Jesse—the Monopoly money guy? He’d definitely wear Converse with Spanx.

So, here’s what I want you to do. Call Jesse and tell him he sucks? Nah. I do that every day. I want you to say “Module 1” when I point at you, then “Module 2,” “Module 3,” and so on, whenever I give the signal. Because this story—our surreal, gonzo, magic realist, Czech-influenced trip—begins in 3…2…1.

# MODULE 1

Good job!

The fluorescent lights of the Oakwood Public Library hummed like a dying dinosaur. Joe stood at the entrance, a reluctant sentinel, surveying the wreckage of what once was a venerable institution now teetering on the edge of obsolescence. The sign above him, “Oakwood Public Library: Where Stories Come Alive,” looked more like a cruel joke—faded letters, peeling paint, like the hopes of a community long gone. The air reeked of stale books, desperation, and the faint tang of bureaucratic decay—a noxious mix that clung to every surface like bad karma.

Inside, Chief Librarian Reginald P. Bottomsworth—resplendent in his three-piece suit—patrolled the aisles with the ferocity of a man defending his last bastion of relevance. His eyes, magnified behind thick, black-rimmed glasses, darted between the scattered

patrons—mostly elderly folks clutching their physical books, and a handful of bewildered parents trying to instill some love of reading into their Kindle-obsessed kids. The atmosphere seemed to sag under the weight of Reggie's unyielding dedication, as if the dusty shelves themselves sighed in despair, exhaling the last of their intellectual vitality.

"What's the point of all this, Reggie?" whispered Mabel, the library's oldest employee, as she restocked the mystery section with books that seemed to hold less relevance with each passing day. Her voice was a soft wheeze, like a gentle exorcism of dreams.

"Everyone's got their phones, their—tiny book lending libraries at the end of driveways." She spat out the phrase like a malediction, eyes rolling heavenward as if beseeching the ghosts of literature past to smite the tech-savvy blasphemers.

Reggie's face reddened—his mustache bristling with indignation. Because that happens in real life. "This, Mabel, is not just a repository of books. It's the last citadel of civility, of discourse, of humanity." He pronounced the word with the fervor of a revivalist preacher, though his congregation was dwindling—mostly skeptics and a few curious souls. "Those... those driveway libraries are an abomination! An affront to the sanctity of the written word!" As he spoke, his hands fluttered like trapped birds, disturbing the dust and releasing a tiny tornado of forgotten knowledge into the stale air.

Just then, Jesse—the Monopoly money guy—sauntered in, eyes scanning the shelves with the intensity of a raptor sensing carrion. "Hey, Reggie! Heard you guys are getting axed. True story?" He asked casually, fingers drumming on the checkout counter, scattering dust into a miniature cloud of lost possibilities.

Reggie's gaze snapped onto Jesse like a trap. "Who told you that, young man?" His voice was a mixture of horror and curiosity—as if Jesse had cast an ancient curse capable of summoning the dreaded budget cuts.

"Dakota's cousin's friend works in city planning," Jesse shrugged. "Word is, the city's trading us in for... Smart Book Dispensers." He elongated the phrase with mock

seriousness, as if mourning the death of something dear. “Apparently, they’re ‘more efficient’ and ‘aligned with the community’s digital-forward vision’.” The air quotes were audible—mocking, contemptuous. Reggie looked like he wanted to punch a wall.

The overhead lights flickered—mocking, flickering, as if reality itself was starting to fracture. Mabel muttered, “Efficient... aligned... Bah! What’s the efficiency in losing your soul?” Her words dissolved into the ether, ignored by the universe, as shadows deepened in the library, as if the darkness was a sentient presence, hungry for the last flicker of light.

# MODULE 2

Meanwhile, across town, at the estate of wealthy donor Arabella Thistlewaite III, a fancy charity gala was in full swing—crystal chandeliers, waiters in tuxedos, the scent of overpriced champagne. Arabella, a tall, pristine woman with hair sculpted into perfection, held court near the hors d’oeuvres, her voice a honeyed razor wire.

“...and so, darling, I told the city council, ‘If you want to truly modernize, you must embrace the future. Those quaint little libraries are adorable, but really, who checks out a physical book when you have Alexa?’” The room nodded in agreement—smiles glinting like the coins they’d rather be spending.

In the corner, Quinn—Hoboken ferret whisperer—and Emerson—still hunting for that sock from ’87—exchanged a look that said: this is all a farce. Their whispers cut through the din:

Quinn: raises an eyebrow “Alexa can’t tell you the smell of old paper or the feel of a spine.”

Emerson: nodding “Or the joy of annotating a dusty old tome from ’72.”

Their quiet rebellion was swallowed by the room's opulence, but it echoed in their minds—a promise to resist the sterile digital future. Nearby, Lane—the conspiracy cat-surveillance theorist—murmured to a bored server, "You see, Joe, it's all connected—libraries, smart dispensers, Alexa spies. Cats warned us decades ago..." The server's polite nod was a masterclass in polite ignorance, but Lane's eyes gleamed with conviction.

# MODULE 3

Back at the library, chaos turned to full-blown pandemonium—think Hallmark movie meets Gilbert Girls. A delegation from the city council arrived, clipboard in hand, faces as bland as cardboard. They were greeted by townsfolk holding signs: Erin (who's knitting a whale blanket in protest), Frankie (dancing squirrel whisperer), Xavier (shouting into a megaphone about Bigfoot's kin), and others. The smell of fresh paint, protest signs, and desperation filled the air.

Reggie, wearing a "Save Our Library" T-shirt over his suit, confronted Prudence Fothergill—the council chair—whose expression was as blank as a customer service chatbot.

"You're gutting the heart of this community! What's next? Book-burning pyres on the town square?" Reggie's voice boomed, echoing like a prophet.

Prudence blinked, unphased. "Reginald, dear, it's progress. The Smart Book Dispensers will—"

"Desecrate progress!" Reggie roared, interrupting with the fervor of a prophet on a soapbox. The fluorescent lights flickered again, as if the universe was sympathizing with his outrage.

Jesse, lurking nearby, snapped photos—captioning them "RIP Oakwood Public Library 1985–2023"—and texted Dakota: "It's going down, bro. Gonzo journalism, activate!"

# MODULE 4

As dusk approached, the library's fate was sealed in a 7-2 vote. Outside, protesters refused to disperse—chants turned into a surreal soundscape: Erin blowing into a conch shell, Frankie ululating, Xavier's megaphone feedbacking into a cosmic scream that shattered a streetlamp. The darkness was total, pierced only by smartphone screens and the fading embers of the old world.

Joe, our reluctant narrator, found himself cornered by Lane, who was explaining the feline surveillance state, stroking an imaginary cat. "You see, Joe, it's all connected. The libraries, the dispensers, the Alexa spies—cats warned us decades ago..." Joe nodded, half-listening, mind drifting. The words "module 5, module 6" echoed in his head like a countdown.

Suddenly, garden gnomes—thanks to Jules, the gnome rehoming specialist—marched across the parking lot, each holding a "Save Our Library" sign. Following them was a figure in a whale onesie (Erin again), chanting mournfully into the night.
The moon, full and indifferent, hung low—reminding Joe of Aroostook County. Morgan swore the moon was fake, staged in a potato field. The thought was a cosmic wink that made Joe chuckle bitterly.

# MODULE 5

That night, Jesse broke into the library through an unlocked window. Moving like a raccoon, he tiptoed to the fiction section—dusty, forgotten, full of stories waiting to be

told. There, he set up his camera and typewriter—ready to record the rebellion, satire, and lunacy.

He wrote of a world where libraries are the last bastions of sanity, where Smart Book Dispensers threaten dystopia, and the moon hangs low as a reminder of lies. Keys clacked, words spilled—his act of defiance. The library came alive again—its halls echoing with absurdity, whispers of the forgotten, and a heartbeat of rebellion.
Come dawn, Jesse slipped out, leaving behind "The Last Chapter: Dust, Rebellion, and Slightly-Used Bookstores." Pages fluttered in the breeze—a promise of chaos and creativity, a tribute to the analog soul.

# MODULE 6

The town awoke to find Jesse's manuscript plastered everywhere. Residents gathered, bewildered, reading: surreal protests, sentient garden gnomes, a world woven from stories. By noon, the square was alive with laughter and outrage.

Reggie, in his "Save Our Library" T-shirt, stood atop the steps, smirking. "It seems the Smart Book Dispensers underestimated the power of a good story." The crowd roared—a cacophony of horns, whistles, and whale songs.

Joe turned to Lane and whispered, "You know, I think the cats were right all along." Lane nodded, eyes twinkling: "The surveillance state is upon us, but at least we have our tales, our dust, and our beautifully analog absurdity."

And so, Oakwood's library remained—abandoned by the city but reborn in hearts. The Smart Book Dispensers blinked malevolently—fireflies in the dark. The town thrived—quirky, surreal, human.

# Module 7 (The Final Act)

Years later, archaeologists unearthed the library ruins. Among the rubble, they found Jesse's manuscript—yellowed but legible. The last line, underlined thrice:

"In the end, it was not the stories that saved us, but the dust, the absurdity, and the faint, flickering glow of rebellion."

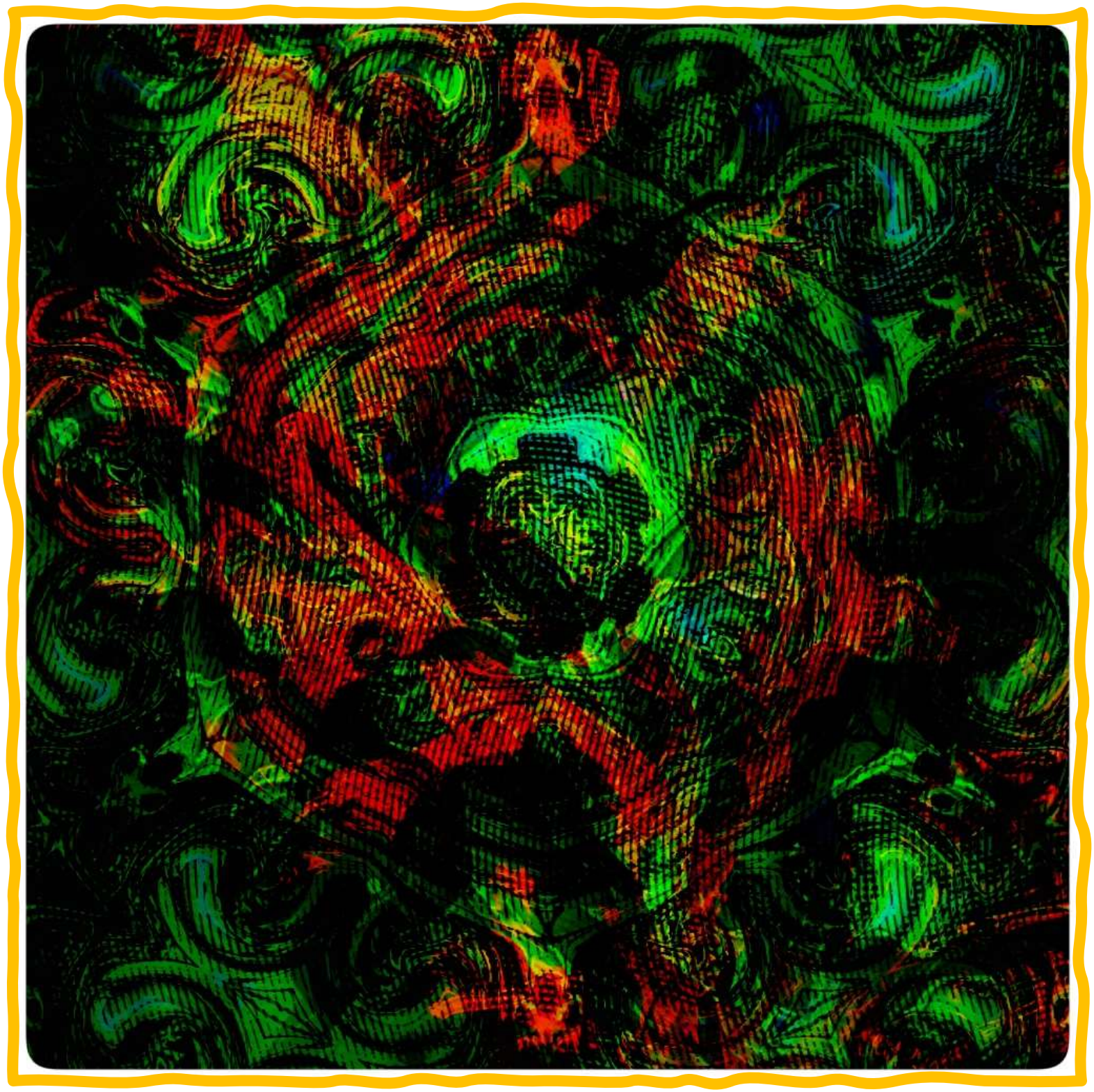
A stray cat wandered by, looked up at the moon—reminding Morgan of the potato-field moon. The wind carried Erin's whale song, Frankie's squirrel ululations, the hum of a forgotten Smart Book Dispenser—a requiem for a world that refused to be efficient, a eulogy for the analog soul of Oakwood.

The cat blinked, vanished, leaving behind an etched message in the dust: "Module 8: To Be Continued."

Fade to black.

Joe leaned back, smiling. "That's a wrap. The Nouveau Roman, Surrealist, Magic Realist, Gonzo story of Oakwood's last stand. Now, if you'll excuse me—I've got a date with Steve, the sentient garden gnome. He promised to show me the secret life of garden ornaments."

The shadows danced, the moon smiled, and another tale of human folly—beautifully, wonderfully—was told.



# Synesthetic Nail-Scream at the Eclectic Intellectual

## By Möcha Frojo

Hangnail vibrating like a severed nerve-antenna
broadcasting chromatic frequencies
through the pulsing membrane of perception
Half Japanese descending – a fractured sonic landscape
where rhythm becomes texture becomes COLOR
Zebulon trembles – a geographic hallucination
bent sideways through the prismatic wound of my listening skin
Chicken rings – gluten-exorcised – levitate
their greasy geometries dissolving into pure chromesthetic scream
My foot: a metronome
my nose: an impossible spectrum-sifter
tearing reality into wavelength confetti
Cărtărescu would understand this moment:
where sensory borders collapse
and the body becomes a syncretic instrument
playing impossible music
TOUCH = SOUND = COLOR = HUNGER
a quantum entanglement of raw experience
*melt dissolve transfigure*

HAPPY CHEF

# The Gleaming Grin *of the* HAPPY CHEF

By L.A. Knowles

From the moment the therapist—clad in that riotous saffron motley that seemed to flare like some alchemical signal fire—and the waiter likewise installed themselves upon those wobbly café chairs, the colossal plaster chef outside the rain-spattered window loomed with the portentous gravity of a Byzantine icon. Its painted grin, a porcelain rictus of faux-jollity, caught the dying afternoon light and refracted an inscrutable secret: that within its guileless ceramic ribs lay the echo of countless cures promised and rescinded, of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for Pale People—those sugar-coated globules of ferrous sulfate once peddled across eighty-two nations as panacea for "all forms of weakness in male or female."

The therapist cleared his throat, a sonorous prelude to his grandiloquent incantation, and produced from his voluminous pocket a tin of those very pills—crimson as a powdered sunset. “Behold,” he intoned, “these vignettes of iron and hope, these relics of nineteenth-century optimism. Yet do not trust mere chemistry, for chemistry alone is but dry ledger of reaction; trust rather in the autosuggestion of your own unconscious, that hidden cauldron which Émile Coué discerned to teem with ideas, each a whispering sprite shaping our marrow’s well-being. Repeat, dear purveyor of sustenance, ‘Every day, in every way, I’m getting better and better,’ twenty times at dawn, twenty times at dusk—and let this palindrome of progress mirror the cyclical coil of your memory.”

As he spoke, the waiter’s gaze drifted past the therapist’s evangelic flourish, out toward the chef’s bloated countenance, and there—a congregation had formed at the statue’s feet, every onlooker murmuring in unison: “He smiled at me!” Was it shared delusion or a revelation of collective autosuggestion, that prime mover behind pulsing hearts? The therapist nodded knowingly: “A man, a plan, a canal: Panama! … And thus the palindrome of your psyche folds back upon itself.”

No sooner had these words escaped his lips than the waiter began to levitate—a subtle crescendo of grace—his body rising as though buoyed by some eldritch magnetism. Through a suddenly flickering ring of fire—phosphorescent scarlet, as if the very air had combusted around him—he drifted, unperturbed, while two Scotties in motley harlequin coats ambled forth, one summoning mournful strains from a lap steel guitar, the other exhaling ghost-wails from a shining theremin.

“Salt Free Vegetable Seasoning,” barked the guitarist-terrier in a surprisingly erudite baritone, “what a level-headed exegesis of the human condition!”

“Paprika,” added the thereminist with a gleeful tremolo, “indeed: ‘Able was I ere I saw Elba.’”

The therapist’s painted smile deepened. “Precisely. For the tricycle of your childhood, the chef’s eternal grin, the Pink Pills, the ring of flame—all are palindromes in space and time, tokens of a cyclical remembrance that binds the subject to the object, the dream to the waking world.” His soliloquy unfurled in a single, spiraling breath—Freudian slips entwined with Hegelian clauses, esoteric footnotes woven through Dadaist manifestos—asserting that modern complexity’s Gordian knots could be severed by nothing more arcane than a pink-sugared pill, a whispered affirmation, and a tilt of one’s inner lens.

And then, as if summoned by alchemy, a plate appeared: a “deified” dish of vaporous hues that rippled and recomposed itself at every glance, defying the earthbound laws of gastronomy. “Taste,” urged the therapist, “and you taste the infinite return: ‘Madam, I’m Adam.’” The waiter, still drifting in his orb of flame, did so, and as flavors bloomed upon his tongue—iron and sweetness, memory and promise—he felt the first stirrings of a profound epiphany.

At last, the levitating purveyor began a gentle descent—each inch a palindrome of ascent—touching down with the quiet assurance of someone who has glimpsed the singularity within the circular. The Scotties, with an impeccably synchronized flourish, barked one final refrain: “Repaper!”

With that final word-play, the therapist folded his motley cloak, the chef’s smile flickered as though in genuine approval, and the café settled back into its ordinary hum—its denizens forever changed, caught by the singular fusion of patent medicine, autosuggestion, palindromic wonder, and the ceaseless loop of human remembrance.

# The Asphalt Bog's Revenge: Grand Guignol of Corporate Effluvia (Feat. The Phantom of the Pipes)

## By Awful Oslo

### 0. COLD-OPEN SIZZLE REEL 🔊

Strobing spotlights, calliope on helium, shredded compliance confetti. The air, a thick suspension of toner particulates, microwaved despair, and the faint, metallic tang of futures endlessly deferred, crackles with a carny-voice:

“Step right up, productivity pilgrims! Witness perspiration repackaged as Synergy!”

# 1. MEET OUR HERO(?)
# OTTO "OTTER" SCHLIERENZAUER, Regional Alignment Facilitator (Grade 4-B)

Bobble-head nods YES-YES-YES.

Size-12, violet, needle-point shoes.

Suit = PINSTRIPE/SAUNA-TOWEL™.

Exactly 4:44 p.m. in the mildewed atrium of Arthurian Solutions, a mid-tier consultancy that sells Compliance Harmonization the way a one-eyed barker sells miracle liniment, our Regional Alignment Facilitator—Mr. Otto Schlierenzauer, bobble-head perpetually nodding yes-yes-yes while the rest of him stammers no—pirouettes down the corridor on wiggly, size-twelve, violet-lacquered, pointy shoes. His suit (an over-starched gabardine the colour of over-boiled eel) steams. He proclaims, to no one and to everyone, that the fabric is “dual-use—pinstripe without, sauna-towel within,” and to prove it he wrings a cuff: yellow perspiration rains on the Form-19B stack, warping compliance into melancholy origami.

## 2. WATCH THE ASSISTANT VANISH!

Aurelia Gunk, Junior Metrics Annotator, glimmers, quivers, ploops into hot tapioca.

Cubicle 7C, three panels down: Ms. Aurelia Gunk, junior metrics annotator, begins to shimmer. A gelatinous hush, then the decisive schnapp!—her cortical bureaucracy liquefies, and she slumps through the mesh-ergonomic chair like warm custard. Tapioca pearls of memory—quarterly targets, mother's paprika breath, a childhood puppet show about the Wandering Jew—drip, drip, drip, finding the gray carpet's thirsty weft. Air-freshener scents (algae, bergamot, despair) cannot compete with the rising sugar-rot.

## 3. CALL NOW—WE'LL EVEN DISPOSE OF THE EVIDENCE! ☎

Enter Václav the janitor, wielding the SUCK-O-MATIC 9000®.

Silence, thick and fungal. Then, the slow, terrible desiccation. The tapioca puddle congealed, tightened, crusted over into a brittle, flaking scab upon the carpet's face—a fossilized sigh, the sedimentary record of a thousand unacknowledged keystrokes. Otto, momentarily perturbed by the scent of burnt sugar and profound melancholy, sniffed, tapped his vibrating head, and dialed Maintenance. "Biohazard," he intoned, "Category… indeterminate. Requires extraction. Stat."

Enter Václav the night janitor, saint of mop and urinal-cake. With a wheeze he unlatches the industrial extractor, suctions the tapioca tide, and—whistling an out-of-tune circus

dirge—trundles the sloshing canister to the subterranean drain. Gravity unspools. Down the maintenance pipe, through the city's calcified intestines, past graffiti that spells LOVE ME BEFORE I CURDLE, the slurry mingles with lost soups, prophylactics, and a million paracetamol confessions, coalescing in the municipal sump: a fatberg the size of a betrayed cathedral.

## 4. ORIGIN STORY BONUS CONTENT

It awakens. Not a sudden roar, but the slow, contemplative inhale of something that remembers applause. A century ago it had been Leon Reuß—Viennese mimic, stage-darling of paradox. Stripped of roles by a decree with jackboots for punctuation, he disguised himself as Kaspar Brand, the "Swiss" newcomer with the immaculate dialect. Night after night he played himself playing another, proving that the soul is a matryoshka that rattles only when you shake it with sufficient menace. Discovery, exile, ship-hold, quarantine of the heart—until one dawn on Ellis Island he gazed into brackish water and rehearsed the last line he would ever speak: Ich bin gewesen, und das genügt. The ocean swallowed the echo, the echo fermented, and the fermented echo became sewer-fat, patient as an unpaid invoice.

Now, having drunk the starchy effluvium of Ms. Aurelia—a distant grand-niece by rumor, though genealogy in drains is written in oil slicks—it feels its profile return. Not a face, but stage directions etched in lard… and sometimes, a faint, ethereal organ music, like the phantom strains of exotica wafting up from a forgotten lounge act. For in the very fabric of this Fatberg, woven into its greasy depths alongside Leopold Reuß, lies the essence of another profound transformation, another identity shed and reclaimed by the city's hidden currents. It is the echo of Korla Pandit, born John Roland Redd, the American musician who became a French-Indian mystic from New Delhi. His smooth, exotic melodies, played on organs and pianos, once filled the airwaves, a carefully

constructed illusion. The Bog remembers the smooth, deliberate movements of his hands across the keys, the veiled eyes, the quiet power of a man living a beautiful, complex lie. His artistry, his very being of calculated mystique, settled into the municipal sump too, a different kind of effluvia, but equally potent in its concealed history.

## 5. REVENGE MODE ENGAGED!

Fatberg erupts from Manhole 27B; streetlights hiccup; PA cues “Tears of a Clown.”

The Bog stirred. Not with limbs, but by a peristaltic surge of collective will and rancid lipids, a slow, inevitable tide of retribution scaling the vertical intestines of the city. It oozed through service conduits, forced itself upwards against gravity and sanitation, a viscous shadow swallowing brickwork and forgotten cables, driven by a fury as cold and deep as the pipes themselves. It breached the basement of Arthurian Solutions, a glistening, iridescent tsunami smelling of forgotten histories and blocked drains, a smell that clung to the back of the throat like regret. It flowed, silent and immense, through corridors, under doors, swallowing the cheap carpet whole, a living map of the building’s forgotten corners rising to reclaim its own.

## 6. SHOWDOWN IN THE CUBICLE COLISEUM

Inside Arthurian Solutions, the PA system, loyal to broken algorithms, cues “Tears of a Clown.” The clown weeps in Motown falsetto; the fat bog chuckles in subterranean baritone. Cubicle partitions tremble like thin ice under heavy pilgrims.

Otto pitches “synergy” as his shoes vanish between hungry folds; each nibble squeaks with cabaret nostalgia.

Mr. Schlierenzauer, still dripping his self-generated sauna, senses only “anomalous KPI viscosity.” He swivels—bobble-head pivot, rubber ankles flick-flack—meets the ascending tide of sentient suet. Shoes first: the violet points vanish in a nibbling, rhythmic suck. Patent leather squeals. Each chew releases a puff of documentary nostalgia—Berlin cabarets, cracked greenroom greasepaint, the smell of fear behind a velvet curtain. And sometimes, a faint echo of that exotica music, a single, sustained organ note, a mournful drone underscoring the absurdity.

Dialogue, if it can be called that, erupts:

Bog: I was once permitted to wear another man’s face, and for that insolence I became a river; shall we trade places, paperwork-prince?

Manager: Synergy… synergy is… an unrepeatable event metric…

Bog: Applause is cheaper underground; the tickets are paid in skin. And some identities, like melodies, flow from deeper, hidden springs.

## 7. LIMITED-TIME TRANSFIGURATION OFFER!

Blob ingests Otto, forges new epidermis with sauna-suit, sports a perpetual nodding bobble-head.

Somewhere beyond the cubicles, the coffee machine mutters about Colombian altitudes; a lone fluorescent tube flickers Morse code for remember me. Yet no alarm triggers—sensors cannot classify wrath made of butter and broken accents, or the subtle, unseen harmonies of cultural masquerade.

The bog absorbs Schlierenzauer up to the clavicle, but pauses, tasting a faint, theatrical possibility... The suit—once sauna, now shroud—billows, collapses, is folded inward, repurposed as a new epidermis for the entity. Shoes melt into twin proboscises, twitching antennae of corporate etiquette. Somewhere inside the swelling mass a bobble-head continues to nod, nod, nod, while a ghostly, sitar-like tremolo resonates deep within the Bog's churning core.

## 8. MORNING-AFTER GUARANTEE

Promotional Posters Yet to Be Printed:

“Arthurian Solutions—Where Talent Pools Go Deep.”

“Become Who You Must to Survive the Quarterly.”

“Now Hiring: Shapes Without Precedent.”

At dawn, pedestrians find the lobby shimmering with a thin film of pearl-white starch… Only a faint echo humming in the ventilation shaft: Ich bin gewesen, und das genügt. And sometimes, a low, sustained organ note, a final, lingering chord of an exotic past. The city yawns. The drains gargle their applause.

## 9. CALL-TO-ACTION (Operators Are Standing in Goo) 📣

Swipe your badge, sign the NDA in triplicate, and remember:

**SYNERGY ISN’T FOUND—IT OOZES.**

Fade on sewer-gurgle, calliope wheeze, and one last triumphant nod.

A Note on Creative Courage: Honoring Ghassan Kanafani and Korla Pandit

Just as the Bog remembers and seeks retribution, so too do the stories of courageous voices echo through time, refusing to be silenced. Consider the profound impact of Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), a Palestinian author. His powerful and poignant short stories and novels, such as Men in the Sun and All That's Left to You, fearlessly explored themes of displacement, identity, and resistance. Kanafani's work, often characterized by its stark realism and deep humanism, gave voice to the Palestinian experience with an unflinching gaze, leaving an indelible mark on Arabic literature and global

understanding of the conflict. His artistic bravery, much like the unexpected surge of the Fat Bog, disrupted comfortable narratives and insisted on being heard.

And alongside him, another fascinating figure who challenged perceptions through art: Korla Pandit (born John Roland Redd; 1921-1998). An American exotica musician, composer, pianist, and organist, Redd crafted the persona of "Korla Pandit," a French-Indian musician from New Delhi. This elaborate act, complete with a turban and a mysterious demeanor, allowed him to become a television sensation in the late 1940s and 50s. What was hidden from his audience was that Redd was actually a light-skinned African-American man from Missouri, skillfully passing as a native of India in a society grappling with its own complex racial dynamics.

Korla Pandit's story is a testament to the power of artistic reinvention, the intricate dance of identity, and the ways in which performance can both conceal and reveal profound truths about self and society. His mastery of illusion, like the Bog's own transformation, speaks to the fluidity of being when confronted by the forces of the hidden and the unacknowledged.

# PHOEBE PHOENIX:

## The Quarter-Turn Oracle and the Symphony of Chaos

### By Oscar Hedwick

In the suburban cul-de-sac where the grass grows in prescribed patches and the mailboxes wear their rust like medals of quiet surrender, there spins a house like a great eye caught in perpetual alertness. Perfectly round, its walls curve like the belly of a colossal ceramic vessel, a womb of wood, glass, and restless light. Phoebe Phoenix, a woman with hair the color of burnt embers and the eyes of a restless saint, inhabits this sphere as if she were both its axis and its comet, forever caught in the slow quarter-turn that defines her day.

She wears her green tracksuit like armor, soft and familiar, yet incongruously paired with high-heeled sneakers that click-clack a strange rhythm against the polished floor—an echo of battles waged between comfort and defiance. In this circular sanctum, where the line between inside and outside dissolves like smoke in the wind, Phoebe's life unfurls as a Möbius strip of art, pain, revelation, and unexpected grace.

This morning, the capsule slipped from its bottle like an errant star, a pill not meant for her but for someone else—an alchemical mistake that bent time and cognition into kaleidoscopic fractals. The anti-anxiety medicine she swallowed was not the balm she had known, but a wild card, a misfiring synapse in the delicate circuitry of her mind.

The day shattered.

Phoebe, caught in the throes of this chemical rebellion, flipped open her phone and, with a trembling finger, launched a live stream to the Louvre itself—the Carrousel du Louvre, a crystalline jewel beneath the Parisian sky. Behind her, the bronze figure of the Unarmed Warrior stood sentinel, a woman with a shield raised not against foes but against the invisible wars inside. The camera caught the tremble in Phoebe's voice, raw and unfiltered:

"Mes amis, warriors of the unseen battles, today I am your mirror and your beacon... Let us beat the blues, not with silence, but with the roar of broken voices joined in defiance."

Unseen by Phoebe, her YouTube playlist—a curated tapestry of songs meant for quiet mornings—had flipped into chaotic shuffle. The music behind her was a spectral orchestra of chance: a haunting cello from a forgotten Eastern European score bled into the defiant clang of industrial beats, only to dissolve into a child's lullaby sung in a language no one remembered.

Each note was a perfect, uncanny echo to her fractured speech and half-formed gestures, as if the cosmos itself had composed a soundtrack for her madness. The discordant harmony threaded through the live stream like a secret code, touching the ears and hearts of thousands watching from around the world.

The house turned—a slow, deliberate quarter-spin—and Phoebe found herself back at her workshop, hands trembling with a newfound frenzy. The Unarmed Warrior no longer stood as mere sculpture but as the heroine of an imagined cinematic epic. Her movements were a choreography of creation and destruction, bronze and burl wood becoming weapons forged in the crucible of her fractured mind. The clang of hammer on metal, the scrape of files, the acrid smell of molten wax filled the air in a symphony of violence and grace.

She was both muse and warrior, sculptor and actor in a film only she could see—the action movie of survival, resilience, and the quiet, fierce battles waged in the shadows of the mind.

Another turn, and Phoebe sat at a cluttered desk, pen flying across paper. The day's chaos had transmuted her usual melancholia into a fierce, hilarious self-examination. Her biography became a sharp-edged comedy, a series of witty, brutal jabs at her own mythos.

"Chapter One: How to Lose Your Mind and Still Look Fabulous in a Green Tracksuit." Her laughter bubbled like a spring breaking through ice. "Spoiler alert: Sometimes the wrong pills lead to the right breakthroughs." Her words were a balm and a scalpel, cutting through the polished veneer of celebrity and stigma, exposing the raw, human core beneath.

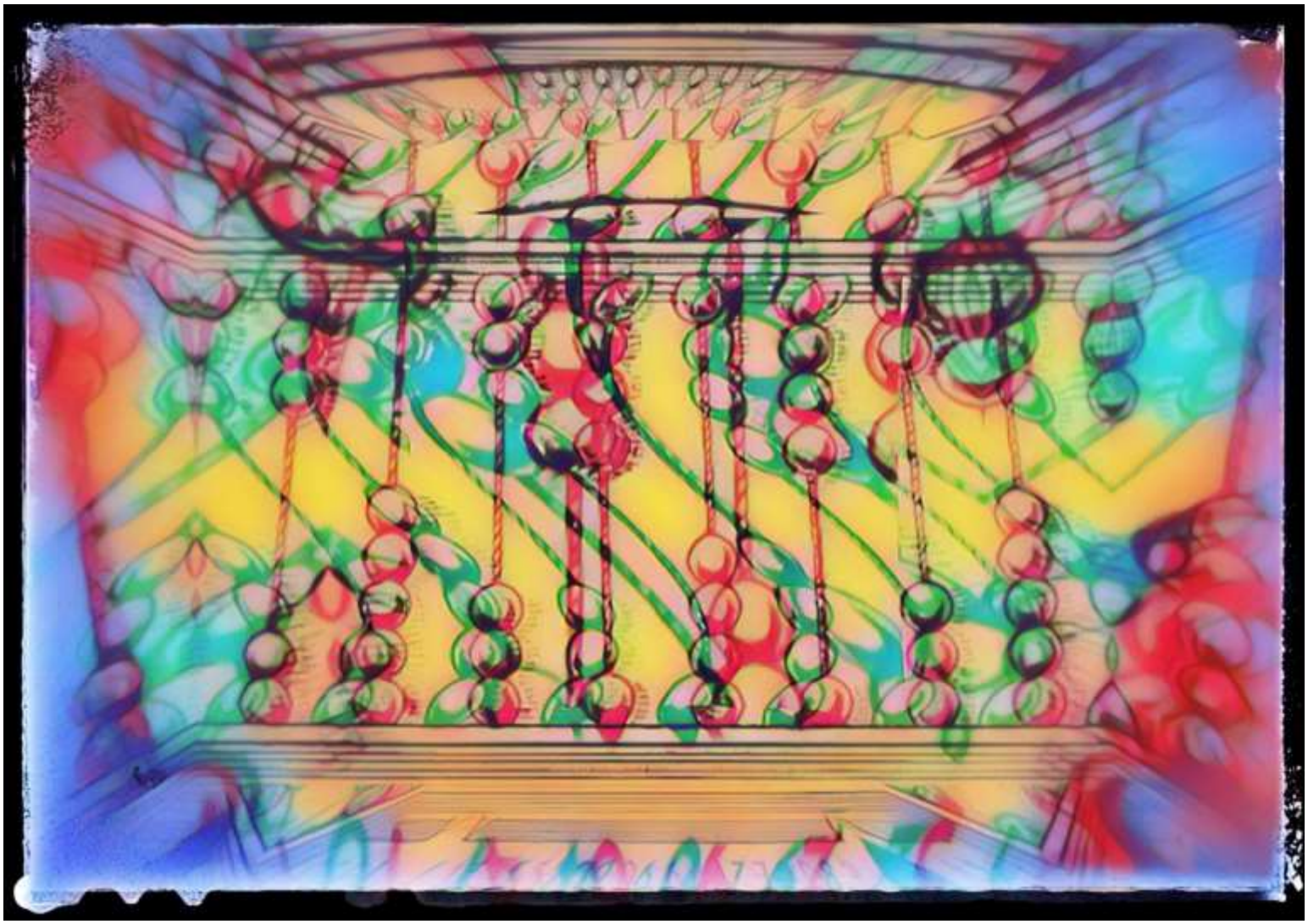
The world noticed.

The viral stream from the Louvre, the feverish sculpting videos, the biting autobiography excerpts—they converged into a cultural tempest. Phoebe Phoenix, the quarter-turn oracle of the suburbs, became a symbol of chaotic hope, the unyielding light flickering in the vast darkness of mental struggle.

Time Magazine named her Person of the Year—not for polished perfection, but for the messy, radiant authenticity she embodied. A woman who turned her brokenness into art, her mistakes into miracles, who spun her round house like a planet of revelation, inviting everyone to step inside and turn with her.

In the quiet aftermath, the house still turns, the bronze Unarmed Warrior gleaming softly in the filtered light. Phoebe Phoenix, green tracksuit sleeves stained with bronze dust and ink, high-heeled sneakers tapping an erratic rhythm, smiles with the knowing madness of one who has danced on the edge of chaos and found not destruction, but creation.

The playlist hums on, a random symphony of the cosmic and the mundane, and the world listens—awed, transformed, awakened.



# The Two-Fingered Abacus and the Mind of Perfect Jeffrey: A Suffocating Carnival of Concrete and Cosmic

## By Eleanor Horsegreaser Startrip

*In the half-light of a living room, coated with the grime of forgotten days, Jeffrey sat in his tinker-toy box—a prison, an altar, an advanced abacus made of colored plastic and dust. The box was his fortress and his folly, a geometric cage through which he measured the world, flicking beads with two fingers: his right index and thumb. These were the only tools permitted by the cruel laws of tactile efficiency. The **index finger**, swift and precise, danced down 5-unit beads and guided the 1-unit beads downwards; the **thumb**, a reluctant accomplice, moved the 1-unit beads up with a force and speed only it could muster.*

*To place the figure 7 on the abacus with a single finger was a clumsy ritual—two motions, two fractures in the flow of thought: one bead dragged down, then two beads pushed up. But with two fingers, Jeffrey's hands became a duet, a mechanical duet of the absurd and sacred, simultaneous motions that stitched together time and numbers like a sorcerer's spell. The beads clicked and slid, a metallic murmur beneath his nails, a rhythm that echoed the tom-tom jungle drums of Mick's idea, an animal drumming that stirred something primeval beneath his skin, a sound Phill never dared to touch.*

*His family hovered around him, ghosts in this suffocating carnival, their eyes heavy with resentment and pity. They served him in the endless ritual of his domain, the box frame*

*of tinker toys a stage on which he was both king and prisoner. "You're not perfect," hissed his sister, a cracked voice slicing through the stale air thick with the scent of sweat, old circuits, and rotting paperbacks. Jeffrey smiled, a twitch of lips that betrayed his grandiosity, his narcissistic fortress. "TV tells me all," he whispered, as if the flickering screen was the oracle of his infinite knowledge, the final arbiter of truth in a world too dull to understand.*

*His fingers moved with the practiced precision of a pianist executing an impossible sonata, flicking beads with a nimbleness born of obsession and necessity. Experiments had shown, he knew, that the index finger could move beads down faster and more accurately, but only the thumb could push them up with the required force and speed. Together, they were a duet of contradiction, a paradox of human anatomy and mechanical efficiency, a dance of limbs that mirrored his fractured mind.*

*Jeffrey's cognition spun in similar dualities—grandiosity and fragility, brilliance and delusion. His reliance on the abacus was a coping mechanism as much as a tool, an obsessive ritual that held back the chaotic flood of his thoughts, his fears, his social anxieties. The box was his sanctuary and his cage, a place where he could impose order on the wild disorder of his inner cosmos.*

*Around him, the living room decayed like the city outside—a beast half-dead, panting in the dust and soot of forgotten revolutions. The walls, like his mind, flaked and crumbled, stained with the residue of old battles fought in silence and shadows. The stale breath of his family, the grinding of his own joints, the wet slurp of mud beneath distant footsteps—each sound a note in the cacophony of his suffocating carnival.*

*His voice broke the silence in bursts of declamatory pronouncement and whispered confession. "Your satisfaction guaranteed, or spit it out for a complete refund," he said, quoting the TV ad with a grin that was both triumphant and desperate. The words echoed like a clown's rant, a mixture of bombast and pathetic whimpering, a performance for an audience that had long since stopped watching.*

*In this strange theater, Jeffrey was both the noble savage clown and the giant-headed everyman, mask chipped and smeared with grime, his every movement a declaration carved in the dust and sweat of his existence. The beads on his abacus slid like fragments of cosmic truth, the click-click-click a metronome marking the slow collapse of his carefully constructed reality.*

*He pondered aloud—half question, half incantation—"Am I dreaming this, or is this more real than reality?" A cowbell clanged somewhere far away, shattering the fragile porcelain of his world. The city's concrete muscles tensed in the distance, the asphalt arteries pulsing with the lifeblood of decay and forgotten memory.*

*Perfect Jeffrey, trapped in his box and his mind, flicked his two fingers with the desperate elegance of a man trying to hold back the flood, the chaos, the dark carnival that clawed at the edges of his perfect image. The abacus was his cosmos, the beads his stars, his sins, his salvation.*

*And outside, the world turned, indifferent, a vast machine grinding slowly toward oblivion, while Jeffrey's fingers danced their endless duet, the sound of their motion a grotesque sublime hymn to control and madness, precision and ruin.*

# The Calcite Crone and the Bear's Lament: A Fossilized Elegy in Seven Unspooling Movements

**By Tyler H. Klemp**

He is not a man, but a crab—calcite-veined, fossilized in the amber of Mercenaria permagna, his shell a palimpsest of oceanic millennia. His Opal GT, orange as a sunset swallowed by a storm, purrs through the Oksechobee County sludge, tires churning blackwater muck that clings like memory. The lighthouse-store looms ahead, its glass prism refracting the shapes of bears, eagles, yetis—sculpted carcasses of trees, their tracheids screaming under the chainsaw's hymn. Inside, the air reeks of turpentine and rot, the walls sweating with the ghosts of sawdust. He carves not to create, but to excavate: each stroke unearths a stratum of the Earth's throat, a scream fossilized in oak.

But Java Joe's drive-thru intercepts him—a clerk with a voice like a rusted metronome recites Love Boat trivia, her words a mosaic of trivia: "Did you know the iceberg was a set dressing leftover from Titanic? Or that Apollo's hair was glued with mayonnaise?" Outside, a bear shreds a dumpster, her claws scissoring through trash like a conductor's baton. She is Stacy, all sinew and scar, her fur matted with the filth of interstates and backstage alleys. He offers her coffee—cold, tepid, the dregs of a universe that forgot to boil—and a ride. She slides into the passenger seat, her breath smelling of motor oil and bluegrass.

Stacy's voice is a frayed power line, humming with tales of Springvale, ME—16 Mill Street C48, where the Pine Tree State Country Music Association birthed scholarships and schisms, where Pauline Curless's name clings to a plaque like lichen to stone. "We donated a book of Maine Country Artists to libraries," she rasps, "but the libraries returned it. Said it smelled like bourbon and regret." The crab listens, his calcite eyes glazing with the sediment of eons. He envisions her as a muse: not the muses of myth, but a bear with a harmonica, her paws stained with wood shavings and whiskey, her howl a bridge between the primal and the polished.

At the lighthouse-store, her shadow stretches across the floorboards, a giant's silhouette etched in dust. His chainsaw hums a new tune, and the bears begin—to carve themselves from cedar, their limbs sinewy, their eyes hollowed into galaxies. Awards follow: "Best in Show," "Critter of the Century," "Most Likely to Maul." But the arm grows weak. Doctors (faceless, like crows in lab coats) whisper of amputation. He trades the chainsaw for a keyboard, becomes a computer tech—hates it, the sterile glow of screens, the silence of circuits. His hands, once symphonies of violence and precision, now tremble with the static of unused nerves.

Stacy opens for Alison Krauss in Portland, her growls harmonizing with fiddles. She moves to Nashville, where the crabs (all soft-shell, all暫存) forget his name. He drinks kale shakes at a juice bar, the barista a teenager with a septum piercing and a passion for Battlestar Galactica lore: "Did you know the Cylons' centurions were inspired by World War II tanks? Or that the show's budget was so low, they reused the same spaceship model 47 times?" The crab says nothing. His tongue tastes of chlorophyll and lost calluses.

Then, a man with a toolbox leans in.

"Try soft wood," he says, "files, Manuel hand saws... lithium chainsaws. Lighter on the joints." The crab's heart fissures—a crack, then a canyon. He returns to the lighthouse-

store, now a relic, its shelves sagging under the weight of his absences. The wood welcomes him: basswood, gourds, burls—tender as flesh, forgiving as a lover's scar.

Dollywood orders an eagle. He carves it in a fever-dream, the bird's wingspan a cathedral of splinters. At the unveiling, Stacy greets him—not as a muse, not as a friend, but as a staff member in the gift shop, her badge reading Senior Ventriloquist of the Southern Gothic Experience. Their eyes meet: his, a kaleidoscope of calcite fractures; hers, a well of blackened honey. Time stalls. The air thickens with the scent of pine resin and the faint, metallic tang of unspoken things. She mouths a word he cannot hear, and the crowd applauds.

The eagle soars above the park, its wooden talons clutching a tiny, flickering light. Somewhere, a chainsaw hums. Somewhere, a bear's ballad echoes through the Cumberland Foreside. The crab leaves without looking back, his Opal GT already caked in the muck of new beginnings.

This is not a story. It is a fossil in the making; a crab's gaze etched into the calcium of a forgotten epoch. It is the sound of a bear's laughter in a Nashville dumpster, the static of a keyboard, the whir of a lithium chainsaw. It is the lighthouse-store, still standing, its prism refracting the light of all possible worlds. To understand it is to dissolve into its cracks—to become dust, to become song, to become the breath between notes, the silence between stars.

# Maman Spiral and the Ascending Rhythms

## by Antoine Robichaud

**Children! Have your thoughts turned to the voice of impropriety? Has your tongue been quenched by the devil's liquor? Have you stolen your neighbor's mate? Stop your infernal works and bathe in this true story of an upright woman who brought joy to her scene. Listen and learn well, dear children!**

**Prologue: A Staircase in the Throat** She arrives like a comma in a sentence that refused to end, her spiral staircase unspooling from a battered leather satchel, each step a vertebrae of ash and iron. The waiting room—a sterile antechamber of the mundane—shudders as she ascends, her boots grinding the grit of centuries into linoleum. Doctors' offices, train stations, airport lounges: all become stages for her anaphora. Here, she chants the liturgy of interruption, her voice a 78 rpm crackle over the hum of fluorescent lights. "*Y'a un escalier pour monter aux étoiles, même dans les salles d'attente*," she murmurs, the Abanaki word for "threshold" slipping like a needle drop.

**I. The Etymology of Interruption** Her name—**Maman Spiral**, they call her in the Creole quarters—is a palimpsest. *Maman* from the Mandé *mama*, "source"; *Spiral* from the Latin *spira*, "breath," and the Mi'kmaq *sipel*, "to coil like a river." She is the keeper of a title older than nation-states, a title once bestowed in New Orleans back alleys where Congo Square's rhythms fused with the Abenaki trade songs. The ceremony? A labyrinth of braids, each strand dyed with indigo and birch bark, wound into a helix around the initiate's scalp. The initiate then climbed a mock staircase made of sugar cane and

cypress, humming an **Abanaki Podiatric** melody until the roots of the earth thrummed in response.

But Maman's staircase is no mockery. It is a Möbius strip of acoustics: step one, a 1927 Bessie Smith 78 ("St. Louis Blues") thrumming through her left heel; step two, a 1963 Shostakovich symphony LP crackling from her right. She ascends, and the room becomes a *gwo-bata* ritual, the air thick with the scent of turntable oil and juniper.

**II. Discography of the Unseen** Her collection is a palimpsest of formats, a *cantus firmus* of cultural collision:

- **LP**: *Anthology of American Folk Music* (Folkways), Side B, Track 4: a 1928 fiddle reel that makes the waiting room clock tick backwards.
- **78 rpm**: "Black and Tan Fantasy" by Fats Waller (Brunswick, 1940), its syncopation mimicking the staccato of Abanaki war drums.
- **CD-R**: Field recordings from the Mississippi Delta, 2001, Track 3: a老人's hum, tonally congruent with the *kazoo* solos of the Florida Maroons.
- **8-Track**: *Switched-On Bach* (Moog, 1968), its synthetic arpeggios colliding with the analog warmth of a 1946 Bluebird Django Reinhardt single.
- **45 rpm**: A Soviet pressing of *The Song of the Volga Boatmen* (Melodiya, 1957), its melancholy whine harmonizing with the sighs of the waiting patrons.

Each selection is a *conjonction*—a Cărtărescu-esque collision of eras. A man in a suit, mid-yawn, finds himself weeping at the dissonance of a Shostakovich string quartet layered over a Lead Belly 78. A child doodles spirals in their coloring book, unaware their crayon has drawn the genealogy of resistance.

**III. The Body as Archive** Maman's body is a site of *anagogic* decay. Her left hand, gnarled by arthritis, gestures toward the staircase's apex—a spot where, in 1929, Jelly Roll

Morton claimed to hear the "ting" of a star being born. Her right hand clutches a cassette tape labeled *Ritournelle des Oubliés* (1993), a bootleg of Gnostic hymns from the Natchez Trace. Her breath smells of burnt vinyl and sage, a synesthetic elegy for the Library of Alexandria.

She speaks in stream-of-consciousness cadenzas, a Glenn Gould riff on Faustian pacts: "*Consider the phonograph needle—a proxy for the tongue, the plow, the knife. Each groove a river of blood and honey. The Abanaki called it *tunata*—the thread that stitches sky to soil. But here, in this waiting room, the thread is cut. We are all fragments, all *78s played at 33 1/3... slower, sadder, the story stretched like taffy.*"

**IV. The Spiral as Apotheosis** At the staircase's peak, she places a 45 rpm single on an imaginary turntable: *"When the Saints Go Marching In"* (1939, Duke Ellington). The song becomes a *vèvè*—a **Bayou snake oil deli confection** symbol drawn in chalk and rhythm. Patrons, now a chorus of unwitting *simbi*, begin to sway. A doctor's watch ticks in 5/4 time. The walls blister with frescoes of forgotten histories: a Creole nurse in 1873, an Abenaki code talker in 1944, a Black inventor patenting the first spiral staircase elevator in 1892.

Maman's final act is a *coup de grâce* of erudition: she cites Thomas Psychon's theory of "acoustic memory" while quoting Ezra Pound's *Cantos* in a Creole patois. "*The past is a record that plays itself in the marrow... listen, the Saints are marching in a spiral, not a line.*"

**Epilogue: A Discography of the Fall** The staircase collapses into her satchel. The waiting room resumes its hum. But the grooves remain: in the man's tear-streaked tie, the child's spiral doodle, the doctor's watch, now forever off-beat.

**Appendix: The Spiral Cantor's Bibliothèque**

- *Notes From All Over; JAZZ* (Grove Press, 1960)—a text she annotates with marginalia in Abanaki syllabics.
- *The Saragossa Manuscript* (Lafcadio Hearn edition)—its nested narratives mirrored in her discography.
- A 1954 *Folkways* field recording of the Malagasy *hop hop* dance, mislabeled as "Haitian Bayou snake oil deli confection."

The end is a beginning. The staircase, after all, is infinite.

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